

Greta Knutson-Tzara, *Still Life with Flowers*
Stockholm 1899 – 1983 Paris

oil on canvas, 1954
21 ½ by 18 inches (55 by 46 cm)
signed with the monogram lower right: 'GK'
numbered on verso: '32'

provenance: Private Collection, Sweden, 1954-2005;
sale Bukowskis Auction, Stockholm, November 1, 2005, no. 153;
Handelsbankens Konstförening, lottery, Stockholm, 2006, no. 5;
Private Collection, Sweden.

exhibited: Svensk-Franska Konstgalleriet, *Greta Knutson*, Stockholm, November 20 – December 6, 1954,
no. 32.

note: The Swedish-born Greta Knutson (figs. 1a-b). As she wrote in her autobiographical statement, she came from “a well-educated, cosmopolitan family in Stockholm.” Her father was a musician and linguist who had worked in Germany and taught her that language.¹ Although she too wanted to study linguistics in Germany, her family was against this, and so instead she pursued her desire to paint. She studied art first at the Carl Wilhelmson Academy of Fine Arts and then at the Royal School of Fine Arts in Stockholm, but not satisfied with their programs, she went in the early 1920s to study in Paris. There given the choice of enrolling with either Fernand Léger or André Lhote (1885-1962), she chose the latter. Lhote, who was a very successful teacher, had in 1922 founded his own school in Montparnasse. He purveyed a modified version of Cézannesque Cubism based upon intersecting planes and geometric forms, rendered in precise, unmodulated color (figs. 2a-e). This was the style adopted by many of his international pupils including for a time Knutson, who after a period of painting in a fairly realistic manner (fig. 3a) turned to a more abstract approach (figs. 3b-c). While she appreciated Lhote’s work and the fact that he sent his students to copy the old masters in the Louvre, Knutson also found him “a despot, who wanted everyone to adopt his color system.”² Therefore, she quit his school after one year to pursue her own way, as perhaps indicated by her *Self-Portrait* of 1923 (fig. 4).

In 1924 Knutson attended a daring new experimental play, *Le mouchoir de nuages (Handkerchief of Clouds)* by the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), who arriving in Paris in 1919 soon became a leading theorist of the Dada and Surrealist movements. They met in the theater bar and married six months later in Stockholm (figs. 5a-c). With her inheritance, they were able in 1926 to build a family residence and studio on the Avenue Junot in Montmartre designed by the Viennese architect Adolf Loos (figs. 6a-b). They had a son, born in 1927. In 1930 Tzara published the poetry collection *L'Arbre des voyageurs* dedicated to Greta with illustrations by Joan Miró. But by 1937, the couple had separated and were formally divorced in 1942. Through Tzara Knutson had met such important surrealist figures as André Breton, Hans Arp, Valentine Hugo, and Man Ray.

During the 1930s both her art, especially in drawings, (figs. 7a-b) and poetry were distinctly Surrealist. One of her poems “Foreign Land” of 1933 seems to reflect having seen the early works of Salvador Dalí, which had been on view in Paris:

Why interrupt
the conversation of sleepwalking clocks,
to ask them the dangerous way
When they will have named
sailboats, icebergs, sugar and ebony
and the humble silk of the moon.³

Knutson was to become, in fact, not only a life-long artist but also a dedicated writer, publishing essays, art criticism, and occasionally poems and novellas. She had her first solo exhibition in Paris in 1929 and in Stockholm in 1932. Beginning in the late 1920s, she participated, with her husband and their surrealist colleagues, Breton, Éluard, Hugo, and others in the collaborative, chance-based, artistic parlor game known as “*cadavre exquis*” (“the exquisite corpse”). Taking turns, each artist without seeing what the previous one had drawn added on to the other’s drawing, resulting in creations which the Surrealist scholar Mary Ann Caws has described as “a strange, composite person or creature”⁴ (figs. 8a-b). Several of these collaborative productions in colored pencil by Knutson are now in the Pompidou Center, Paris (figs.8c-e), and one of the most elaboratel of ca. 1933, titled “Landscape,” is in the Museum of Modern Art (fig. 8f). In that same year Knutson collaborated with her husband and the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf on the publication *Fransk surrealism (French Surrealism)*, which had articles on Dalí and poems by Tzara, Breton, and Éluard, which she helped translate, as well as a cover that was another of their collective efforts (fig. 8g).

Once she separated from Tzara, Knutson turned away from Surrealism, writing that she “found the tyranny of André Breton unbearable,”⁵ and took an interest in phenomenology as propagated by Edmund Husserl with its attempt to objectively study consciousness. With a liking for the freedom of style she found in such diverse contemporary artists as Braque, Matisse, and Derain, her own paintings, alternating between the parallel tracks of the realistic and the abstract and displaying a mixture of Cubist and Surrealist elements, were to continue through the 1940s and into the 1960s (figs. 9a-g). She was still active in the 1970s (figs. 10a-b), and her work culminated in a series of what she called “oneiric paintings,”⁶ meaning fantastic, dream-like compositions (figs. 11a-d).

Tristan Tzara was a close friend of the poet René Char (1907-1988), and in 1935 with Greta he visited Char (fig. 12a) at his ancestral home on L’Isle-sur-Sorgue in Provence. Shortly after this Greta and Char became lovers.⁷ In 1938 she inscribed one of her surrealist drawings to him (fig. 7b), and about the same time supplied the illustrations for his poetry cycle *Le visage nuptial*, which vividly suggests the flowering of their relationship (fig. 12b). Knutson was also deeply involved with assisting Char in his work as a leader of the French Resistance movement during the War years, supplying false papers to refugees and helping them escape from France to Spain. This did not prevent her, however, from painting a portrait of Char’s first wife, Georgette Goldstein, in 1944 (fig. 12c), or in 1939 Tzara sending Char a warmly inscribed copy of a book of his poetry.⁸

Knutson, who claimed to dislike Paris, lived during and after the War primarily in Aix and Vaucluse and took up both farming and sculpting. She was a friend of the sculptor Alberto

Giacometti and also the writer Albert Camus. Knutson only infrequently returned to Stockholm, but did continue to exhibit there.

In her writing she evinced a definite melancholy and in 1983 committed suicide in Paris. Only now in 2019 has Knutson-Tzara been fully recognized as an important and unique artist with the publication of a detailed monographic study and presentation of an extensive exhibition in her homeland (fig. 13).⁹

Throughout her career, beginning with her earliest works (figs. 14a-b), Knutson displayed an interest in still life. She even wrote a French poem entitled “Nature morte,”¹⁰ and depicted herself with all the elements for one of her still life paintings in a study of the early 1940s (fig. 14c). In her years in France these still life compositions of humble objects took various forms, both realistic and abstract, but she had a distinct liking, perhaps reinforced by her study with Lhote, for flower motifs (figs. 15a-i). In the present well-composed painting of 1954, as in others of this period (fig. 16), it is difficult to determine the actual space. At first glance the complex composition seems almost totally abstract – patterned fields of variegated color, undulating shapes, a suggestion of movement, and the background and foreground merged. But upon careful observation, a context emerges; it is possible to see a table and upon it a vase with flowers. All of this is rendered in a simple, almost playful, manner to allow for the mix of color and form to develop unhindered. As Knutson proclaimed in an article, written at just this time, her painting style represents a synthesis, what she calls “half-abstractation” in which “rhythm has replaced construction.”¹¹ The result is both decorative and monumental.

¹ See Greta Knutson, *Bestien*, Berlin, 1980, p. 229.

² Quoted in Martin Sundberg, *Greta Knutson Tzara*, Stockholm, 2019, p. 57.

³ Quoted in Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, Austin, 1998, p. 69.

⁴ Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism*, London, 2014, p. 62.

⁵ Knutson, Berlin, 1980, p. 231.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A love letter of ca. 1938 from Char to Knutson was sold at Christie's, Paris, April 21, 2010, lot. 76.

⁸ Sold at Sotheby's, Paris, June 25, 2015, lot 176.

⁹ Sundberg, 2019 and exhibition at the Norrköpings Konstmuseum, March 23-September 1, 2019.

¹⁰ See Knutson, Berlin, 1980, p. 217.

¹¹ Quoted in Sundberg, 2019, pp. 184-85.